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THE MAGIC BOAT.

BY PHILLIPS BARRY.

A LEGEND of a magical self-moving boat appears in literary documents from the time of the Pyramid kings of Egypt, and is yet current in popular tradition. With certain considerations bearing upon the origin and diffusion of the legend, the following article will deal.

In the hagiographic tradition of the Latin Church is an important though neglected storehouse of information relative to themes and motifs in mediæval literature and modern folk-lore which have their parallels in the non-Christian literature and mythology of antiquity. This tradition is one of the by-products of the Egyptian-Christian institution of monasticism, and reaches back to a time when Christianity was yet in a fluid state.¹ The interest of the writers, who as early as the fourth century had developed a stereotyped literary form,² was only incidentally that of the historian:³ they wrote to entertain. Inspired by *die Lust am Fabulieren*, they were not averse to the appropriation of properties from the lore of the old gods, as is shown by the presence of Egyptian elements in the legend-lore of the Church;⁴ for instance, the bridge of sunbeams,⁵ the ladder to heaven, the resuscitation of the dismembered dead by re-assembling their scattered members,⁶ the healing properties of water in which a holy person had bathed.⁷ In dealing with the origin of a given legend, the hagiography will not infrequently decide the question whether it is indigenous to the literature or lore of a certain people, or is part of a tradition which has spread with the expansion of Christianity.

The magic boat is a common property of the mythology of the Arthurian cycle,⁸ and has been referred to Celtic sources. It is first found in secular literature in the *Echtra Condla* ("Adventures of Connla"), an Old Irish text of the *Lebor na h-Uidre* ("Book of the Dun Cow"), the compiler of which died in 1106.⁹ In the hagiography,

¹ See my article "Martyrs' Milk" (*The Open Court*, September, 1914, pp. 561-564).

² Seen in the Coptic Tales of the Martyrs, of monotonous sameness in content, the saints being for the most part quite devoid of individuality.

³ Notable exceptions, of course, are such documents as Willibald's life of St. Boniface, or Ruodger's biography of Bruno of Cologne.

⁴ Louise Dudley, *The Egyptian Elements in the Legend of the Body and the Soul*, pp. 6-7, 11-14.

⁵ See my article "The Bridge of Sunbeams" (*this Journal*, vol. xxvii, pp. 79-89).

⁶ See my article "Martyrs' Milk" (*The Open Court*, September, 1914, pp. 564-565).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

⁸ L. A. Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

however, are a number of references to miracles of self-moving ships which antedate the end of the tenth century, in witness whereof the following documents may be put in evidence.

1. The saint, by his presence on board, causes the ship to travel of itself.

(692-696.) Valerius. *Vita S. Fructuosi*, 13:

Quibus statim . . . remos naviculae auferentibus, vel etiam obdormientibus, ilico sanctissimus vir orans . . . nullo homine navem contingente, sed Dei sola manu gubernante, ad ulteriorem amnis ripam celeriter transmeavit.¹

(806-808.) Book of Armagh:

Deinde, secundum imperium sui magistri, (Lommanus) in sua navi contrario flumine . . . Domino gubernante pervenit.²

2. The presence of a saint's body or relics on shipboard causes the ship to travel of itself.

(755-768.) Willibald. *Vita S. Bonifatii*, 8:

Sicque statim redditum est corpus . . . ac sine navigantium labore . . . perductum est ad . . . Magontiam.³

3. A ship in the service of a saint becomes animated with self-motion.

(847.) Rudolph of Fulda. *Vita S. Rabani Mauri*:

Subito e manibus eorum lapsa (navis) in amnem, vi quadam invisibili contra impetum fluminis acta ferebatur, donec ad locum quo sacrum onus susceptura erat, littori, applicita pervenit.⁴

(875.) Adrewald of Fleury. *Miracula S. Benedicti*:

Navis . . . subito absque humano remige a portu emota, medium Ligerim petit, . . . ibique contra adversum pelagus fortiter enatando, pervenit ad Posterulam. . . . Videte, o cives, contemplamini qualiter. . . . Benedictus mortali sine remige navem propriam . . . regit.⁵

(968.) Adso of Montier-en-Der. *Vita S. Waldeberti*, 14:

Mox navis divino impulsu a remige illuc absque humano iuvamine sponte perducitur qua sancti corpori [= corporis] gleba tenebatur.⁶

¹ AA. SS. Boll., April, ii, 434.

² *Analecta Bollandiana*, ii, p. 213 (a note added by Ferdornach, compiler of the Book of Armagh, to Tirechan's memoir of St. Patrick). According to the *Bethu Patraic* (eleventh century), St. Lomman rows his master up the Boyne.

³ W. Levison, *Vitae S. Bonifatii*, p. 53.

⁴ AA. SS. Boll., 4 Feb., i, 517. The occasion was the translation of the relics of St. Venantius from Rimini to Fulda.

⁵ AA. SS. Boll., 21 March, iii, 306 (the flight of a ship from Orleans to save its cargo from dishonest customs officers).

⁶ AA. SS. Boll., 2 May, i, 280.

4. A ship becomes animated with self-motion in answer to prayers to a saint.

(850.) Monk of Corvey. *Historia Translationis S. Viti*:

Dum . . . vulgus . . . ad portum fluminis cui Wesara est vocabulum, advenirent, accidit ut navis ex altera parte fluminis sine gubernatore fixa staret. . . . Repente navis mota est a loco in quo fixa erat, et paulatim natando sine remige et ventorum impulsu . . . sponte ad eos recto tramite pervenit.¹

(948.) Flodoard of Rheims, *Historia Remensis Ecclesiae*, iv, 9:

Nauta defuit, nave ulteriori defixa fluminis orae. . . . Dolore perculsi, in terram proni devote precantes. . . . Moxque navis soluta divina virtute nexu quo tenebatur affixa, ripae qua expectabatur accidit appulsa.²

(1002.) Aimoin of Fleury, *Miracula S. Benedicti*:

Navis etenim . . . divinitus soluta, absque ullo mortali remige, ad eam in qua coenobita ille cum sociis residebat fluminis partem transit.³

The foregoing documents show that as early as the end of the seventh century, at least among the clerics of Braga, the legend of the magic boat was current; that by the tenth century it was known in Mainz, Fulda, Corvey, Fleury, Rheims, Montier-en-Der, and elsewhere. In the earlier strata of the hagiographic tradition, represented by the documents of the Egyptian Christians in the Coptic language, closely similar stories are to be found, in witness whereof the following texts are cited.

1. The saint, by his presence on board, causes the ship to travel of itself, while the crew sleep.

(c. 400-600.) Martyrdom of St. Sarapion:

Appulerunt ad pagum iuxta flumen situm, ut ibidem dormirent. Bonus vero Deus decepit sensus eorum, ita ut nescirent quo ambularent, donec pervenerunt Panephosi in nomo Nimessot, et hac ipsa nocte ad pagum appulerunt. Mane autem consurgentes, huc et illuc respexerunt, putabant se esse in loco ad quem vespere appulerunt.⁴

(c. 400-600.) Martyrdom of St. Sarapamon:

Lorsqu' ils arrivèrent en face de la ville de Pchati, le vent les abandonna, et ils entrèrent dans une crique du côté de la rive occidentale. A

¹ AA. SS. Boll., June, ii, 1036.

² M. Lejeune, *Histoire de l'Eglise de Rheims par Flodoard*, ii, 495.

³ AA. SS. Boll., 21 March, iii, 323 (of Oylbold, cut off by the river Indre, who prays to St. Benedict for means to cross). St. Rudesind was said to have performed a similar miracle on challenge, — AA. SS. Boll., March, i, 111, *Vita S. Rudesindi*: Si vera sunt, quae de te soliti sumus audire, nobis succurre. . . . Quod postquam dixerunt . . . lembum venientem viderunt, et cum portum Deo remige teneret, . . . intraverunt.

⁴ I. Balestri and H. Hyvernat, *Acta Martyrum Aegypti*, p. 60.

l'heure de minuit, ils se reveillèrent, et ils se trouvèrent au station du côté de la rive orientale.¹

2. The presence of a saint's relics on shipboard causes it to travel of itself.

(980.) Severus of Eshmun, *History of the Patriarchs*:

(A ship captain steals the head of St. Mark; his ship, however, will not put to sea.) And when they turned it around, as if to enter the city, it sped towards it like an arrow.²

Finally, in a Coptic Encomium on John the Baptist,³ is a reference to the magic boat which gives a clew to the origin of the legend itself. The passage is as follows:

"The Saviour said, . . . 'Whosoever shall light a lamp in the shrine of St. John, or before his image, shall be ferried over the river of fire (by these oars) in the boat of gold which I have bestowed upon John my beloved.'"⁴

As Dr. Budge has pointed out, the figure of John the Baptist has replaced the old Egyptian Ferryman of Sekhet-Earu, frequently mentioned in the Pyramid Texts. A surly person, the Ferryman had to be bribed, cajoled, or browbeaten into giving the Pharaoh passage to Heaven across the Lily lake. If entreaties and threats failed, it was still possible to cast a spell on the oar, as by the following utterance:

(c. 2550 B.C.) "Thou which art in the fist of the Ferryman of Sekhet-Earu, bring to Meri-Re thy boat."⁵

Elsewhere in the Texts the king takes possession of the Sunbeam barque of Re,⁶ which he steers across the sky by virtue of the sceptres of the deities who rule the Circumpolar Stars.⁷ In one passage the boat itself speaks to him.⁸

As far, then, as the hagiographic tradition is concerned, the magic boat is another element in Christian legend, derived from the priestly lore of Egypt. Like the "Bridge of Sunbeams" and certain other legends, it must have passed thence into secular literature, reaching finally, as in the ballads, the level of popular tradition.⁹

83 BRATTLE STREET,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

¹ H. Hyvernat, *Les Actes des Martyres de l'Egypte*, p. 328.

² R. Graffin and F. Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis*, i, 499. The story relates to an incident in the taking of Alexandria by the Arabs in the year 641.

³ Written in the Sahidic dialect. The manuscript is dated in the year 985; but the apocryph itself must belong to the period of literary activity in Upper Egypt, which came to an end before the Arab conquest in 641.

⁴ E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, 349.

⁵ K. Sethe, *Die Alten Pyramidentexte*, 1743.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 926-927.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1157, 1432.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 950.

⁹ See my article "Bells ringing without Hands" (*Modern Language Notes*, vol. xxx, pp. 28, 29).